

13 August 1972

The bonus and the onus

The Air War In Indochina

Revised Edition.

Edited by Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff.

Preface by Neil Sheehan.

Illustrated. 289 pp.

Boston: Beacon Press.

Cloth, \$8.95. Paper, \$3.95.

By ROBERT KLEIMAN

One of the indestructible myths about the Vietnam war is that the nation's leaders drifted into it, unaware of where step-by-step decisions were leading. But as the scenario starts to unroll all over again, with massive bombing mounting toward the peak levels of the past, the myth needs close re-examination.

It was the introduction in February, 1965, of American air power on a large scale into the guerrilla war within South Vietnam that first transformed the role of the United States, from giving arms and the advice of a 24,000-man military mission into direct involvement in combat. Within weeks there began the sustained bombing of North Vietnam; organized units of the North Vietnamese Army invaded the South, and the United States committed ultimately more than half a million ground troops.

The week the American air war began, a visitor asked Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the United States military commander in Vietnam, whether the death and destruction already inflicted on the South Vietnamese countryside by American-built planes, some with American pilot-advisers aboard, would not escalate enormously now and prove self-defeating. Could the oft-proclaimed American objective of "win-

Robert Kleiman, a member of The Times editorial board, is the winner of the 1972-73 Alicia Patterson Fund fellowship award.

ning the hearts and minds of the people"—in what was more a political than a military conflict—be achieved through the application of murderous firepower, which inevitably would kill innocent civilians as well as Vietcong?

"We've looked into that problem," the General replied, "with the help

of a study group sent out by Rand [the civilian research organization]. Our conclusion was nutshellled at lunch the other day by the head of the team:

"We've got the onus; let's get the bonus."

Seven years and almost seven million tons of bombs later—more than three times the tonnage dropped by American planes in all theaters during World War II—the undoubted onus and the alleged bonus can be evaluated.

The Cornell University Air War Study Group, a team of 21 scholars of many disciplines led by Raphael Littauer, professor of physics at Cornell, analyzed all the significant official and unofficial reports available on the American air war in Southeast Asia, its policies, its methods, its effectiveness—and its cost, both to the United States and the peoples of Indochina. They distributed their findings privately in November, 1971, and then revised and updated them for this publication by Beacon Press.

"The Air War in Indochina" is a cold, clinical study. But its revelations—many extrapolated from piecemeal data, then assembled like a jigsaw puzzle—are startling. Some of its most striking estimates were recently corroborated by a leak of the secret 548-page National Security Council study memorandum on Vietnam (NSSM-1)—drafted in 1969 for President Nixon by eight Government agencies and coordinated by Henry Kissinger and his staff. NSSM-1 was printed in the Congressional Record of May 10 (p.E.-4975) and May 11 (p.E.-5009).

Mr. Littauer and his colleagues devote considerable attention to the bombing of North Vietnam. But what stands out in their study even more than the damage done to the enemy in the North is the devastation inflicted on our friends in the South.

Of the 6,300,000 tons of bombs dropped on Indochina from 1965-71, the Cornell group estimates that 600,000 tons were dropped on North Vietnam, while 3,900,000 were dropped on the South. (The remainder went into Cambodia and Laos, much of it on the Ho Chi Minh trail.) Allied artillery, mortars, rockets, other ground weapons and naval guns pounded Indochina with an added seven million tons of munitions in the same period, most of it in South Vietnam. South Vietnam is smaller than the state of Missouri.

The number of civilian casualties in North Vietnam was estimated by

a 1967 C.I.A. study cited in the Pentagon Report 29-002 for 1965. Two years later, in 1969, the Defense Department said in NSSM-1 that "it has been estimated that approximately 52,000 civilians were killed in North Vietnam by U.S. air strikes."

In South Vietnam the casualties have been much higher. Senator Edward Kennedy's Subcommittee on Refugees, relying on official reports has estimated noncombatant casualties through April, 1971, from military action by the United States and the Saigon Government at a minimum of half a million persons, about one-third of them killed, a percentage of population that is more than double that suffered by German civilians under Allied bombing in World War II.

Vietnamese society has been completely dislocated by the bombing. In the North, urban populations have had to disperse. In the South more than six million (about one-third of the population) are estimated to have become refugees. The number of urban Southerners (including those in squalid refugee shantytowns) has almost trebled to an estimated 40 per cent of the population, making South Vietnam more urbanized than Sweden, Canada, the Soviet Union, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and all other Southeast Asian states.

The original rationale for the large-scale

use of air power was that it would save the lives of Allied troops. Army Brig.-Gen. Glenn D. Walker said, "You don't fight this fellow rifle to rifle. You locate him and back away. Blow the hell out of him and then police up."

Close air support of troops in action, often decisive in a conventional battle, can even be effective against guerrillas. But civilian casualties then mount. Guerrillas are highly mobile and hard to distinguish from the population—especially from fast-moving jet aircraft. Intelligence is often faulty. The Air Force is under pressure from ground units to use area weapons, such as napalm and cluster-bomb units, even against snipers. Area weapons, by definition, are indiscriminate.

Nevertheless, efforts were made, at the start, to limit civilian casualties. In August, 1966, after revelation of a dozen bombings of friendly troops and villages, General Westmoreland appointed a board of senior officers to improve control procedures. "One mishap—one innocent civilian killed, one civilian wounded or one dwelling needlessly destroyed